

**The world of Jesus-
Life in 1st. century Palestine study 1**
Politics: Greeks, Maccabeans, Herod & his sons - Rome



Alexander the Great

May 323 Alexander the Great collapses and dies a few weeks later - overindulgence or poison?

His huge empire immediately falls apart, fought over by rival generals. Around 305 BC in Egypt, Ptolemy declares himself king, founding a dynasty that will last until 30 BC with the death of Cleopatra. In Asia, Seleucus also declares himself to be king, founding a dynasty which endures until 64 BC.

Israel lies directly between the Seleucid dynasty to the north and the Ptolemies in the south and pays the price. During the 3rd century BC five wars are fought between these two rival kingdoms. Alluded to in Dan.11, where the “king of the north” (Seleucids) and the “king of the south” (Ptolemies) battle it out in apocalyptic terms of “the he-goat from the west” = Alexander. [see map]

Israel is at first controlled by the Ptolemies, with Jerusalem seized in 320 BC. Many Jews are deported to e.g. Alexandria which rapidly becomes one of the most important cities of the Diaspora. No attempt is made to compel them to abandon their faith or their religious practices, although Hebrew as a language is soon replaced by Greek. In Alexandria the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) is made.

223 BC -187 BC resurgence of the Seleucid monarchy. 198 BC Israel and Jerusalem now under the control of the northern kings and of one particularly malevolent ruler, Antiochus IV.

Antiochus Epiphanes: [*theos*] *epiphanes* – [*god*] *incarnate*

Returning from the life of a hostage in Rome, Antiochus comes to the throne with a high regard for Roman power and a burning passion for Hellenistic ways. He is the “little horn” of Dan 8v9f.

In Jerusalem at that time there are two rival claimants for the high-priesthood. One of them named Jason persuades Antiochus to support him. In return he promises to be an advocate for the Greek life-style in Israel as well as making a large donation to the empty royal coffers. Then another claimant to the high-priesthood appears and bribes Antiochus into appointing him to office. This new high-priest Menelaus, is not even a member of the family of Zadok or indeed of any priestly family. Opposition begins to harden around the *hasidim*, the *holy ones* (forerunners of the Pharisees).

170-169 BC war with Egypt once again. To help pay for the war, Antiochus loots the Temple treasury with the active co-operation of Menelaus. Initially successful, Antiochus suddenly comes up against an immovable object. 168 BC an envoy of Rome is waiting for him at Alexandria gives him an ultimatum to withdraw from Egypt at once. Antiochus has no choice but to agree.

Furious at this humiliation and hearing of unrest in Jerusalem, Antiochus interprets this as pro Ptolemaic protests and determines to strengthen his grip on the country. He reinstates Menelaus as high-priest and stations a garrison in Jerusalem. He realises that the heart of any resistance to his rule and the very heart of Jewish nationhood is their religion. He orders that the Temple rituals should be suspended; the Sabbath and other festivals no longer observed; the scriptures be burned; dietary laws be abolished along with circumcision. December 171 BC an altar is dedicated to Zeus in the Temple precincts and unclean animals including a pig sacrificed upon it – the *Abomination of Desolation* (Dan 9v27; 11v31; 12v11).

The Maccabees / Hasmoneans resist (167-164 BC).

Many Jews die rather than submit to these new laws but some begin active resistance, including a priest named Mattathiah and his five sons who live in western Judea. They flee to the hills of Judea and are soon joined by others, adopting classic guerrilla tactics of hit and run raids and of intimidating collaborators. When Mattathiah dies leadership goes to two of his sons, Simon and Judas *Maccabeus*, or Judas the *Hammer*. (*Hasmonean* comes from the name of an ancestor called *Hashmon*). The Maccabees begin to win set battles, eventually forcing Antiochus to the negotiating table. The ban on Jewish religion is lifted and Antiochus withdraws almost completely from Israel leaving only a small garrison in Jerusalem. Judas moves into Jerusalem to cleanse and to restore the Temple – an event which is celebrated at Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights (cf Jesus’ triumphal entry). The struggle continues for many years but in 141 BC the Seleucids grant independence to Judea, although the country is not completely free until 128 BC.

The Rule of the Hasmoneans 128-65 BC

John Hyrcanus is now the undisputed ruler of free Judea and in later times the years of the Hasmoneans become a mythic "golden age." However the *hasidim*, who had supported and fought with the Hasmoneans in the war of independence, resent the fact that the family holds in one person the three-fold positions of the civil, military and religious (i.e. the high-priest) powers and form a focus of opposition. In contrast another group strongly supports the regime, and become known as the *Sadducees*. They will dominate the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, for the next fifty years.

During his reign John Hyrcanus extends the limits of the kingdom, including conquering Samaria and destroying a rival temple built on Mount Gerizim. His son extends their rule into Galilee (which becomes a hotbed of Jewish nationalist sentiment) and for the first time takes the title of *king*, rather than *ethnarch* [*ruler of a people*] as his forebears had done. But only God is Israel's true and only king? Tragically, as the years roll on the Hasmonean dynasty descends into violence, corruption and oppression.

"...the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome."

The republic of Rome has gradually been expanding its sphere of influence, assimilating provinces and peoples. Pompey the Great intervenes in the civil war between rival members of the Hasmonean family. He captures Jerusalem in 62 BC and from this moment on Judea becomes a vassal state under the direction and authority of the Roman governor of Syria.

47 BC Julius Caesar appoints Antipater as procurator of Judea and in turn Antipater names one of his sons Phasael, as military prefect of Judea and another, Herod, as prefect of Galilee. Herod (aged 25) proves himself to be an energetic, ruthless and effective soldier but his brilliance as a politician is that he remains loyal to whoever is in power in Rome at the time - i.e. he is trustworthy and dependable to whosoever. During a period of unrest Herod flees for safety to Rome. By decree of the senate Herod is declared "king of the Jews". After three years of fighting he makes this title effective.

Herod the Great (37BC- 4 AD).

Herod rules for 33 years over Palestine and parts of the Transjordan as a faithful ally of Rome. In theory he is an independent sovereign allied to Rome but in reality he is bound to obey Rome in all things, forever dependent for his throne upon its good will.

Herod is called "the Great" because of his elaborate building projects but there is nothing about him to make him great in Jewish eyes. He is not pure blood Jewish but half Idumean, an offspring of the hated Edomites and he had ascended to the throne at the expense of the native Hasmonean dynasty, who now that they are no longer around, appear in an ever more nostalgic glow.

Herod tries to reinforce the legitimacy of his reign by marrying Mariamne, a Hasmonean on both sides of her family. Threatened externally and feeling the weakness of his position internally, Herod descends into paranoid suspicion. He will eventually execute (among others) Mariamne and her mother, a past Hasmonean king named Hyrcanus, his own uncle and three of his own sons. He is also notorious for the murder of the babies and children in Bethlelem as recorded by Matthew.

Herod begins a series of building projects: Samaria, renaming it *Sebaste* (Gk. *sebastos* = Roman *augustus*) in honour of Caesar Augustus. However his greatest project is the enlargement of the Temple begun in 19 BC. The work employs thousands of people and work continues until 63 AD, only some seven years before it is destroyed in the revolt against Rome.

4 BC Herod dies. On his death his kingdom is divided between three of his sons.

The Herodian Family Tree

Herod the Great

King of Judaea
37-4 BC

Mt.2v1-19
Lk.1v5

Antipater	Aristobulus	Herod Philip Mk.6v17	Herod Antipas Tetrarch of Galilee 4BC - AD39	Archelaus Ethnarch of Judaea 4BC -AD6	Herod Philip Tetrarch of Iturea & Trachonitis 4BC- AD34
			Mt.14v1-10 Mk.6v14-28 Lk.3v1;13v31f Lk.23v7-12	Mt.2v22	Mt.14v3-11 Lk.3v19

Archelaus immediately hurries to Rome to ask the Emperor Augustus to ratify Herod's will. However a rival delegation follows him and petitions for a return to their past temple constitution and to be ruled by a governor appointed by Rome (background to Lk.19v11f?). However Archelaus is successful and is confirmed as ruler of Judea and Samaria. His other two brothers have also gone to Rome for the same reason and they too are confirmed in their posts, with Herod Antipas ruling over Galilee and Perea (Transjordan) and Philip over the territory north east of the Sea of Galilee. However none of them are called "kings." [see *map*]. In their absence there have been large scale riots and risings all over Palestine, requiring the Roman legate in Syria to intervene. As a result, 2,000 rebels are crucified along the road side as a warning.

Herod Philip the Tetrarch (ruled 4BC- AD34)

Rebuilds Pnias and renames it Caesarea Philippi ("Philip's Caesarea") in honour of the Emperor. He appears to have been a kind and beneficent ruler.

Herod Antipas (ruled 4BC - AD39)

Is notorious for the execution of John the Baptist and Jesus describes him as "that fox" (Lk.23v7f). He divorces his first wife in order to marry Herodias, who had already been married to one of his half-brothers and was still married to another! Like his father, Antipas is a great builder including constructing the town of Tiberias on the shores of Lake Galilee in honour of the Emperor.

Archelaus (ruled from 4 BC – 6 AD)

"He had all his father's vices with none of the compensating qualities of competent statesmanship" (Bruce: Israel and the nations).

Appointing and deposing high-priests at will, he further offends Jewish religious sentiments by marrying his sister. So oppressive is his regime that another delegation from Judea and Samaria goes to Rome saying that Augustus risks a full blown rebellion if Archelaus is not removed. Archelaus is banished to France and Judea becomes a 3rd-class Roman province ruled over by a Procurator, appointed by Rome. Although these Procurators are under the authority of the Roman legate in Syria, essentially these are independent commands. The procurators are usually based in Caesarea Maritime (on the coast) only rarely coming to Jerusalem and then only when their presence is needed to ensure public order e.g. Passovers.

The Roman Procurators

As a province of Rome, tribute is now owed directly to Rome and thus Augustus needs to assess what can be raised. 6 AD the Syrian legate Quirinius orders a census of the land. The idea of paying tribute to a pagan king is too much for some Jews and Judas the Galilean, or Judas of Gamala and a man called Sadduq lead a revolt (cf Acts 5v37). Although their uprising is quelled, the *Zealot* movement begins to grow in strength and in power, culminating in the disastrous war against Rome which begins in 66 AD and results in the wholesale destruction of the Temple and the total defeat of the nation.

After the census is completed the first procurator named Coponius arrives to take up office, one of three procurators appointed by Augustus. On Augustus' death his successor Tiberius appoints just two procurators in the whole of his imperial reign, Valerius Gratus (15-26 AD) and Pontius Pilate (26-36 AD).

One way in which the procurators make their money is by selling the office of high-priest to the highest bidder. One of Quirinius' first actions once the new province of Judea has been assessed is to depose Archelaus' high-priest and to appoint one of his own – Annas (Jn.18v13, 24; cf Lk.3v2; Acts 4v6). Annas is high-priest for nine years but is then replaced by a new procurator who appoints a series of high-priests, the last being in Joseph Caiaphas, Annas' son-in-law, who presides as high-priest for 18 years (18-36 AD).

Pontius Pilate (ruled from 26-36 AD)

Pilate consistently (and deliberately?) offends his Jewish subjects. He tries to parade military standards which bore the emperor's image, through the streets of Jerusalem. He hangs golden votive shields in honour of the Emperor and which had been dedicated to a pagan deity on the walls of Herod's palace in Jerusalem. He builds a much needed aqueduct to alleviate the water problems in Jerusalem but uses the Temple treasury to pay for it! Many Jews, probably arriving for one of the annual festivals protest at his actions, to which Pilate reacts violently, sending in his troops in disguise amongst the crowds (cf Lk.13v1.) It may be that Herod's recorded enmity towards Pilate stems from the fact that Pilate had been responsible for the death of some of Herod's subjects and hence Pilate's care in dealing with the Jesus at His trial by sending Him to Herod Antipas (Lk.23v12, 6-7).

The final straw comes when a group of Samaritan pilgrims assemble at Mnt Gerizim, believing that the holy vessels of Moses' Tabernacle are to be revealed. Fearing a riot, Pilate despatched troops with a resultant severe loss of life. Pilate is recalled to Rome to answer for his actions before the Emperor Tiberius but before he arrives Tiberius dies to be replaced by his grand nephew Caligula.

Nothing of certainty is known of Pilate from that time on although the Christian historian Eusebius preserves a report from a Greek historian that Pilate was forced to commit suicide during the reign of the Emperor Gaius (37-41 AD).

Summary

- A volatile kaleidoscope of intrigue and violence, stretching back over 300 years.
- A people who look back with longing to an increasingly romanticised previous golden age when they had been free.
- An oppressive and insensitive pagan regime (Rome) with little regard for Jewish religious sensibilities.

Luke 3v1-2

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar— when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert...